

University of Illinois Student Life 1928-1938
Oral History Project
Geraldine North Marrs – Class of '35
Allerton, Illinois
June 8, 2001

START OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

Ellen Swain: This is an oral history interview for the University of Illinois Archives. The interviewer is Ellen Swain, the narrator is Geraldine North Marrs, and alumna from the class of 1935. We are at Mrs. Marrs's home in Allerton, Illinois and the date is June 8th, 2001.

Could you tell me what your full name is and your birthday?

Geraldine North Marrs: Geraldine North Marrs, and I was born in August 1st, 1913.

ES: Okay, tell me about your family a little bit, where you grew up and what your parents did.

GM: North Central Illinois, a little town of Toluca, it was an Italian mining town. And I went to high school there. And, we lived on a farm, so—

ES: Your father farmed?

GM: Uh-huh, yes.

ES: Did you have brothers and sisters?

GM: Just one sister, uh-huh.

ES: When you graduated from high school, what year was that?

GM: That would be '31.

ES: '31, so that was during the midst of the Depression.

GM: Yes.

ES: How did the Depression affect your family during that time?

GM: Well, I guess we were very poor, but I didn't know it because we had food [*laughter*]. My mother sewed. So, when I think back, I guess, we were very poor on a farm. Prices were very, you know, bad.

ES: Did other people in Toluca. . .were they in the same situation?

GM: Yes, well, most of the people worked in the coal mine there, and most of them were Italian. That's a good way to put it.

ES: How were you able to go to the University of Illinois, or why did you choose the University first of all?

GM: Well, I guess you better go back to the grade school. Small grade school, I was the only one in my class. So, they shifted me back and forth, and I worked with all the students [*laughter*] so I was a teacher's helper.

ES: Oh I see.

GM: And I loved doing that. I wanted, well I always wanted to be a teacher I guess. So then in high school, I still wanted to be a Home Ec teacher, and took all the science that I could. Then I got the county scholarship to go to U of I. Otherwise I probably wouldn't have been able to go, because you know things were pretty hard then. But, that paid everything but the fees, and then I had to work, you know, for my room and board. I worked for a doctor, a dentist and his family. And, helped in the house and stayed with the children. He was a dentist, and they liked to go out in the evening, so I had the kids most every evening [*laughter*].

ES: I see.

GM: But then the last 2 years, I worked for this lady, that had this house for girls, the Vesta House. My job there was making the salads and taking care of the bathrooms and helping with the dishes. So that's the way I worked my way [*laughter*], through college. [These houses were known as "Independent houses." They usually housed about 20 to 30 girls.]

ES: So you got room and board for that?

GM: Uh-huh.

ES: How were you able to find that first job with the dentist?

GM: Well, I went, I don't know what office I went to, but I told them that I needed some work and that was available, and then later, but I was away from campus, and I didn't like that. So then, I tried again, and then this other job was available, so I took that.

ES: Did your parents want you to go to school? Was that important to them?

GM: Oh yes, yes, it was important to them too, and it's just a fact. My sister went through U of I too, later on.

ES: She did?

GM: Uh-huh yeah. She taught school in elementary for a while before she was married.

ES: Did many people from your high school go on to college? Was that unusual for you to go?

GM: Yes, yes. I don't know of too many, well, probably one or two out of a class of thirty-three that went on to school.

ES: I see. Was your sister older or—?

GM: Younger.

ES: Oh, she was younger.

GM: She was younger.

ES: How was she able to go, did she win the scholarship too, or—?

GM: No. Things were a little bit better, well the later part. They were able to send her for I think two years, and then she laid out and taught in a rural school until she got money to go back and finish.

ES: You said you wanted to be a teacher when you went to school, so you majored in education?

GM: I had to go through the College of Agriculture for Home Economics.

ES: Home Economics.

GM: But then I worked with the College of Education later.

ES: So you went to college with a definite career goal in mind?

GM: Oh yes, uh-huh, yep always wanted to be a teacher.

ES: Did you have any favorite professors in the Home Economics Department?

GM: Oh, golly, to recall names now. Yes there were some very fine ones, but I'd have to think about the names. Haven't said them or thought about them really [*laughter*].

ES: What kind of classes did you take in Home Ec, what were they teaching you?

GM: Well, first it was pretty general. I had to take all the science courses that were required, and I think the worst was chemistry. I liked that the least [*laughter*]. We didn't have it in our high school, so I felt like I was behind on that. My last chemistry course I got in with some of the

pre-meds and there were just two of us, two girls, and those guys just took us through that course [*laughter*]. We were eternally grateful. Oh!

ES: Wow! How big were your classes, how many students normally were in a class?

GM: Oh I'd say thirties or so. Not large. The lecture courses of course probably had a hundred or so, but the other classes were not large. And you got to know your classmates and your teachers knew us.

ES: How well did you know the faculty? Did you have a relationship outside the classroom with faculty members, did you go to their homes or—?

GM: Yes occasionally, and yes we were close to the faculty back then. You know, as I say, we were smaller groups than today.

ES: Sure, sure. What do you think were some of the main strengths and weaknesses of your education? Were you happy with the education that you received?

GM: Yes, yes very. It was very good.

ES: Did you feel like you were prepared coming in to the University?

GM: All, with the exception of chemistry.

ES: Of the chemistry.

GM: Uh-huh, took physics and everything else that was available, all the Biology and all the sciences I could take, because I knew I had to do that.

ES: Was it hard to come to such a big school after being at a smaller high school? Did you have a transition period or—?

GM: No, I think I was pretty happy where my hat was [*laughter*]. No that never bothered me at all.

ES: The size of the University was never was a problem?

GM: Never, I mean you were in your own little group, you knew you're little college. So—

ES: Tell me a little bit about the rules on campus. Do you remember rules for students, what you could or couldn't do?

GM: In what area or what?

ES: Well, I know there were curfews.

GM: Oh yes, we had curfew, uh-huh. And on weekends we usually had a dance some place, or there was always something to do on weekends. Then of course, I've been a sports fan all of my life, I'm an avid one [*laughter*]. You saw the stickers on the two cars out here. So, I love athletics and things like that.

ES: Did you ever feel over-regulated at all by some of the rules?

GM: No, no. I thought they were all, well, they were necessary and what we needed to know, and what we shouldn't be doing.

ES: Do you remember Maria Leonard, the Dean of Women?

GM: I don't think I ever met her. I can't remember that I did. But, she was considered a good Dean.

ES: So the students liked her you think?

GM: Oh think so, I think we liked her. We were never, well we didn't have any opportunity to really—

ES: She wasn't very visible, I mean—?

GM: No, I would say that. As now like with some of our professors in our own college. We got to know them really well and enjoy them so.

ES: Were they approachable?

GM: Oh yes.

ES: Did you go to their office?

GM: Sure. And a lot of times we'd have field trips and so forth, and that was nice, you know. You get to really talk to them that way.

ES: Uh-huh.

GM: Yeah.

ES: Where would you go? Where would you take some of these trips?

GM: Oh I don't know, around, they were just walking trips around the campus, or wherever they wanted us to see or whatever they wanted to see rather. But I remember walking around with you know. She would take the class out to see certain things. We had to live in the Building for so many weeks. We had different jobs to do, you were a cook or you were the laundress or whatever, you know. [A Home Management Class.]

ES: Is that right?

GM: Yeah, that was fun.

ES: How long did that last?

GM: Well, the course was first semester, but you had two weeks.

ES: That you lived in the building and—?

GM: Uh-huh yeah, in—

ES: In like a house environment?

GM: Yes, only it was in the, I think which building, well it was one of the older Home Ec buildings, yeah.

ES: I see. Getting back to rules again, was there a strict moral code on campus?

GM: Oh I think much more so than today yes, uh-huh. (). Well, I don't know. Well, they were very strict about hours and things like that.

ES: Was drinking a problem, alcohol?

GM: I wasn't aware of it, if it was. I'm sure there were people that drank, I'm sure, but it wasn't anything bothersome to anybody who didn't want to drink, let's say.

ES: What about religion, do you think religion played a prominent role in student life during the 1930s? Were people involved in the foundations, or—?

GM: Oh yes, yes. And we went to church. On Sunday we went to church which was just part of it. That's how I had been raised anyway. So we always went to church on Sunday. And then some of the churches would have teas for us and that was always very nice.

ES: So you participated in that? Did a lot of people, do you think, other students?

GM: Yes, I know a lot of us, when we were living in Vesta House, you know, my friends, we always went together.

ES: I see.

GM: Two or four, or however many were interested.

ES: How about the President of the University, was he very visible when you were there, did students have much contact with—?

GM: I don't think so. Well, I can't remember—

ES: Having any memories? I think President Willard was—

GM: Yeah, but I never met him personally or anything.

ES: You've talked about this a little bit, but say again where you lived and how that came about. You say first you lived with a dentist in town?

GM: Uh-huh.

ES: And where was that?

GM: That was, oh that was out in West Champaign. Luckily there was a relative of the family I was with that went into the campus area, and I could ride with him, but if I had to walk, I really had to get up early [*laughter*].

ES: How far was it, do you think?

GM: Well, West Champaign from the campus was quite a ways.

ES: Yeah.

GM: Yeah, but you did walk a lot, a lot of places. Then see later I was right there on Nevada Street that was close to the Women's Gym, and closer to the campus, that was much better. I enjoyed it so much then because I could be involved then in activities, yeah.

ES: Tell me about Vesta House. What exactly that was, or how you came to live there?

GM: I guess just lucky. I don't know how I got, you know, she just took in 18 girls. There were three levels, and as I said I helped with those areas, and then we had, I think a 10 or 12 librarians, that came in and ate with us, every evening. So there was a lot more going on in the kitchen. I had a lot to do in the kitchen, but they were all nice ladies. We liked them a lot, and—

ES: And they came in every evening, and you had to help cook for them?

GM: Well, I'd eat, I'd help in the kitchen yeah, uh-huh.

ES: What was the rooming situation like? Did you have your own room, or—?

GM: I had a roommate and then let's see my sister then, by that time was also down there. One year, my sister and I and another girl, that room had for three, but most of the time it was just another girl. I still correspond with the one, my last roommate. She lives in Denver. We visited her home and we hear from her every Christmas. Now that's a long time.

ES: Yeah, that's great.

GM: Yeah.

ES: Did you have organized activities in the house?

GM: I went to the meeting every Monday, where all the—it would be all the presidents, or someone from each house, organized house. We met on Mondays and then we'd have a meeting the next night and we'd relay the information I got about what was coming up all the activities on campus, so it was a sharing thing.

ES: I see.

GM: So that's how we kept in touch with what was going on.

ES: Were there special events planned for the independent houses?

GM: Oh yeah. Uh-huh.

ES: And that's—

GM: Yeah we were involved with whatever was going on. You could if you wanted to.

ES: How did that differ from the sorority system?

GM: Well, there were no fees or, it was—

ES: It was cheaper?

GM: Oh yes. And of course most of us were financially the same place that I was, we couldn't live in a sorority. And—

ES: Was that something you ever wanted to do, be involved in the Greek System?

GM: Not particularly. I was happy with what I was doing because I always had some kind of an office, or except when I worked away from campus, but the last two years were more fun.

ES: How were the Greek students looked upon by the independent students? Did it give one a higher social status to be in a sorority or a fraternity on campus?

GM: I imagine, but that wasn't a problem. As I met with those girls every Monday, you know, and they were just as nice as could be, so I never thought anything about it.

ES: So, you socialized with sorority women too?

GM: Uh-huh too.

ES: What kinds of things did you do for fun when you had some free time?

GM: Well, as I say on the weekends we always went to whatever was going on, the dances and everything like that. We didn't have to have a date, you just went, you know. If you have a date fine. If you didn't you went and enjoyed anyway [*laughter*]. So, I guess I've kind of been athletic and the guys in the next house, I used to play catch with them a lot [*laughter*].

ES: Oh yeah?

GM: They were a nice bunch of guys we liked them. They liked us.

ES: How did you meet people? Where did you meet your friends? Were they the people you lived with or the people in your classes?

GM: Well some of them, well you know—

ES: All of them?

GM: Yeah, uh-huh. There's people that you'd just hit it off with, and enjoyed being with.

ES: Was there any particular place on campus students went to hang out or spend time?

GM: Well—

ES: This was—

GM: There was Prehn's and some of those places you know, back then, that would hang out. There was another one that was close to us, what was the other one? Well, we were comfortable with any of the places that we wanted to be. It was nice to have a meal out. So maybe Sunday night or something like that.

ES: Did you have a meal Sunday night in the house, or were you on your own for that?

GM: Pretty much on your own, whatever you wanted to do which was good too.

ES: How did the Depression affect student life on campus do you think?

GM: Well, we just didn't do as many things as probably they do today. We didn't have the money.

ES: People weren't as involved in the organizations available do you think?

GM: Well, I don't know how I would answer that. We seemed to all be busy, and there were things to do if you wanted to them, or if you just wanted to study, you studied [*laughter*].

ES: Did you ever talk about finances with other friends, about what things they were able to do, or sacrifices that they were having to make? Was it ever discussed much?

GM: We talked about it, but you know, you just accepted what we had. That's just the way it was.

ES: I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the make up of the student body. Do you remember black students on campus?

GM: We didn't have many. I don't think I had any black friends in undergraduate, but in graduate, I met a lot, and really had some nice friends from those. Yeah I enjoyed them. Especially in the summer, in the summer classes when they came back from all over. I met some ladies from I think it was Louisiana, and we got to be really good friends with that course, and they were black. That was my closest association.

ES: But when you were an undergraduate student, you don't remember much about them being on campus or any problems?

GM: No we didn't think anything about it. They were just like us. You know, getting an education.

ES: What about Jewish students? Were there many Jewish students on campus?

GM: Yes, we had a Jewish fraternity right down the next block from us, but I didn't know any of them personally. But yes, there were quite a few Jewish students while we were there.

ES: Were they segregated at all or did they interact with other students on campus?

GM: Yeah, uh-huh.

ES: Were there any Protestant-Catholic problems or not that you're aware of?

GM: Okay, Uh-uh. One of my very good friends was Catholic, and I went with her to a lot of the activities that they had over, through their church. They had more than some of the other churches.

ES: Oh yeah?

GM: Yeah, and the priest over there was so gracious and nice and you know. We just had a good time.

ES: Was that the Newman Foundation?

GM: Uh-huh, Newman Foundation yes. She went to church, so when she had something going on, why she'd take some of the rest of us.

ES: I didn't ask you either about the organized activities you were in. You were in the Women's League.

GM: Uh-huh.

ES: The last two years you were in school. What did that involve, what kinds of things did you do?

GM: That's what I was talking about.

ES: Are those the meetings you were talking about earlier.

GM: Meetings Mondays, and that's when we found out what was going on every week. And I enjoyed that a lot, it's because then I brought it back to our house and shared.

ES: Did they have social events too, organized, the Women's League?

GM: No, no, we were just, as far as I was concerned, we just, it was a sharing thing, getting all the information of what was going on.

ES: You were a representative for you house?

GM: From our house, yes.

ES: I see, I see.

INTERRUPTION.

GM: The Scholarship didn't include some fees, so I always had to pay those. Over the course then of the 4 years, I had to borrow \$600. Then when I got out and got my first job, and I didn't get a job until the second semester, but I did sewing, while I was at home. I got a job for the second semester, \$100 a month and that paid off my debt to the college, my \$600. Oh, I felt so free [*laughter*]. I always think back to that, that was such a good feeling, but I did have to borrow \$600 during my—

ES: What kind of fees were those for?

GM: Oh the labs.

ES: Oh, I see.

GM: That sort of thing, uh-huh.

ES: Did the bank closings in the early 30s affect your family at all? Did your parents have a hard time?

GM: No because my dad was one of these people that would not go into debt for anything. So we never had any debt. We did without [*laughter*].

ES: Oh, I see.

START OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

ES: How aware of national events, going on outside of campus, were you when you were a student?

GM: You know, I don't remember a whole lot about that. I guess I was just interested in, [*laughter*] I loved college so much, I just took advantage of everything that was going on there, than the rest of the world.

ES: So like presidential elections you don't remember—?

GM: Oh yes, you were aware of them but—

ES: Aware of it.

GM: Uh-huh.

ES: Did you know what the news was in regard to the Depression, or what FDR was doing?

GM: You know, I always read the paper, but—

ES: How did you get your news, through *Daily Illini*, or—?

GM: Yes, and radio I guess, had to be.

ES: Were students involved in politics at all on campus?

GM: Oh I'm sure they were, but I wasn't.

ES: You weren't?

GM: I was too busy with other things that were more fun.

ES: Do you remember any kind of radical student groups?

GM: No.

ES: While you were in school, any?

GM: No, uh-uh I don't think so. At least they didn't bother me [*laughter*].

ES: Did you go through Commencement?

GM: Uh-huh, oh yes.

ES: What was that like? What did they do?

GM: We stood up in the rain [*laughter*].

ES: Oh! This is 1935?

GM: It rained that day. We were pretty damp when we got into the building and that was bad, we got warm [*laughter*]. Not hard, but just enough to make it miserable in that rain.

ES: Where was it held?

GM: It had to be in, what was there then? Oh gosh, I can see standing out in front of it. You'll have figure that out, what was there.

ES: It was outdoors?

GM: No, the ceremony was indoors.

ES: The ceremony was indoors.

GM: But we had to line up outside.

ES: Lining up you got wet. I see.

GM: Yeah.

ES: Did your parents attend?

GM: Oh yes. Uh-huh.

ES: Was that a big deal, had other people in your family gone to college before you?

GM: Not my own cousins, no. But they didn't, well some of them went on.

ES: Your parents hadn't gone to college?

GM: No, no they didn't have the opportunity. My dad would probably have been the weatherman because he knew all the signs and he was good at, he could predict anything. My mother out of just 8th grade, taught for a year after she was out, because she didn't get to go to high school, but very interested in education and they really wanted my sister and I to have a good education. They saw to it but it was hard during those years.

ES: Uh-huh.

GM: But we made out all right.

ES: Did you feel like you worked a lot to the exclusion of studying because you had to work your way through?

GM: No, no, not really. I always had time for studying.

ES: And you had time to do social things too?

GM: Uh-huh, yeah. So, school was always easy for me.

ES: That helps [laughter].

GM: Yeah [laughter]. And I enjoyed it.

ES: Now you graduated in 1935, what did you decide to do after graduation?

GM: Well, I wanted to teach. I had to lay out that first semester. Then I started teaching from then on. I taught until '40, then I was married and raised 2 boys, and then while they, you know they were away at school, then I went back to teaching again. So I ended up teaching 28 years. 10 earlier and then 18 up here at Homer.

ES: Did you have a hard time finding your first job?

GM: Yes. They were scarce, that's why I had to wait out, you know, until something came up. And it wasn't until second semester, and that was up in Northern Illinois, Hinckley.

ES: How did you find out about that job? Or how did you look for a job?

GM: Well, the University, you know, kept you abreast of where jobs were, your college. I got a noticed to go up there for an interview and got the job.

ES: Did you stay right after you graduated, you stayed in Urbana

GM: No I went back home for—

ES: You went back home and looked for a job?

GM: Uh-huh. As I said, I did sewing. I made coats and all kinds of stuff [laughter].

ES: Did your friends have trouble finding jobs too?

GM: Yes jobs were very hard at that point in time, yes. You were just very lucky if you found something that you wanted.

ES: Did most of your women friends who were in Home Ec, go in to teaching? Is that what they wanted to do?

GM: Oh, I don't know. That was a goal for a lot, but that field is broad, so they went in to other areas too.

ES: What were a lot of the women majoring in college back in the 30s?

GM: A lot went for teaching in different areas you know. But, I don't know other than that.

ES: I guess the last question I'll ask you is: How has your education influenced your later life? You've kind of talked about this but what did you get out of your education?

GM: Everything I've done [*laughter*]. It's been basic, yeah. I've used it. I use it everyday. I have a diabetic husband. I know nutrition. He's never taken any medicine.

ES: Oh!

GM: And I could feed him. So even that, plus all the teaching, and all the 4-H clubs, you know. Over the years, when our kids were young and Harald was a 4-H leader too, we were involved in all the things in the community, we always have been. Whatever's going on now. He's in Lion's Club and so forth. But, home extension was big. That was an area of Home Ec, and I was in that, gave lessons and all that.

ES: So you really—

GM: It's very basic. I used everything that I was able to acquire.

ES: That's great. Well, do you have anything else, any other memories you'd like to share.

GM: Right off hand I can't think, but—oh I didn't say anything about FHA. I've always had an FHA club. I've had two state presidents, and a treasurer on the state level, and we always had officers in the district, so we went to all of those things. That was the big activity in high school, for the Home Ec girls, FHA. Then later we got the boys, FHA Hero. I also had the class that I liked the most up here at Homer, was family living for the boys and the girls. It was senior class, and it encompassed all areas. I had two sections with vocational kids who were going out to work and then the college bound, and that was pure joy. I just loved working with them. For most of them, you see it was the first class they ever had in Home Ec, and that was fun. You kind of get idea.

ES: Yeah, well that's great, sounds really interesting.

GM: But FHA Hero was big, it is nearly as big now as it was back a few years, and I don't know how many national conferences I took students too or chaperoned, and that sort of thing.

ES: Did the Home Ec department at the U of I have many social or honorary clubs?

GM: Well this one [referring to the *Illio*] and then there's, another one—

ES: Are you talking about Phi Epsilon Omicron and you were—

GM: And the other one was, oh I don't know, you can find out.

ES: Uh-huh.

GM: But there were two, this is one I was in.

ES: Was that something you were just in on paper, or did you have meetings and—?

GM: Yes we did, but it was an honorary. I don't remember the grade point you had to have, but that's what it was.

ES: Okay, well thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW.